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- USSR -

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FOREWORD

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DO "MIRACLE CURES" EXIST?

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Following is the translation of an article entitled "Byrayut li 'chudesnyye istсениya'?" by Doctor of Medical Sciences V. Rozhnov and M. Rozhnova in Agitator (Agitator), No 18, Moscow, September 1960, pages 59-61.7

Readers of our journal have made the suggestion that Agitator answer the question: Do "miracle cures" exist? We now answer that suggestion.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for the defenders of religion to keep alive in people the faith in a nonexistent God. At the present time, fantasies and fabrications of a religious nature are debunked by life and science everywhere. And this is why those who preach religion are forced to resort to all sorts of schemes in order to maintain their influence among the faithful.

The servants of the church and the leaders of various religious sects instill in the people the belief in "miracle cures," in the possibility of getting rid of afflictions through supernatural powers.

The most varied means were once employed for this purpose and, here and there, are still used: fantastic tales of "resurrection from the dead," so-called "healings" -- fixed in advance -- of healthy people, who "for the glory of God" or for a certain remuneration play the part of the seriously ill and masquerade as cripples.

However, history is not without cases, although quite rare, of rapid relief from oftentimes serious symptoms.

Science has irrefutably demonstrated that in those cases the healing power is neither "miraculous" nor God's. Thus, for instance, investigation of many "miraculous" natural springs shows that mineral salts possessing therapeutic properties are contained in the water as ingredients.

Especially amazing were those cases of liberation from an affliction where the cure took place quickly -- often before the very eyes of those present: on the command of a "saint," a cripple would discard his crutches and a blind woman would regain sight in front of an icon.

But even these instances, though they may appear mysterious at the first glance, have their scientific materialistic explanation.

The belief in "miraculous cures" has its origin in the primitive religious conceptions of people who, at that time, thought the world populated by "good" and "evil" spirits. According to that viewpoint, it was believed that disease occurs when the human body is infiltrated by an "evil" spirit hostile to that person. Therefore, the "cure" itself amounted to nothing more than the "chasing away of the evil spirit." Thus, for instance, the patient was given "treatment" in the form of the ritual of Kamelation [?] according to the custom of the formerly backward tribes of the Far East and Siberia, such as the Gil'yaks, Chukchi and Orochi. The shaman, bedizened in countless talismans, would enter into mystical combat with the "spirit of sickness" in the presence of the sick person and other inhabitants of the settlement. He accompanied his invocations by beating a tambourine and a dance of a unique nature. Gradually, the participants in the ritual became drugged and deafened by the accelerating rhythm of the dance, the noise of the tambourine, the exclamations of the shaman, and the smoke of poisonous incense used on such occasions. Then the shaman would collapse on the ground to fall asleep in utter exhaustion. The sick person would also fall into a sort of trance. The shaman's words about the defeat of the "spirits of evil", having penetrated deep into the slumbering mind of the sick person, were at times interpreted as tidings of early convalescence. And it did happen (but very rarely) that the sick person would feel somewhat better, while some of his symptoms disappeared. As a rule, this took place only in cases where the sick person had suffered a nervous shock.

Of course, rituals of this sort had never helped to restore a lost arm or a leg, or a damaged eye. Nor did they save from constantly recurring epidemics of infectious diseases.

When the worship of spirits was supplanted by a belief in gods, the latter came to be regarded as the "deliverers" from disease.

Religion ascribes "miraculous healing" powers not only to God, But also to "holy" natural springs, caves, rocks, and many objects of religious cult.

In pre-Revolutionary Russia, the belief in the power of "holy" relics and of "revealed" icons to "work miracles" was widely prevalent. Long and exhausting trips were made to places where those sacred religious objects were located. Not infrequently did such places become hot-beds of epidemics due to crowded and unsanitary living conditions.

The custom of kissing relics and icons was particularly harmful. It represented a direct means for spreading infection. The plague broke out in Moscow in 1771. Panicked multitudes hastened to the icon of the Bogolyubskaya Mother of God. Following each service (which continued around the clock) everybody kissed the "patroness." As a result, the epidemic not only failed to diminish, but went on a rampage with tripled force.

Faith in "miracle cures" remains stubbornly preserved among some people even now. A majority of the population in our country have

broken forever all ties with religion. But we still have people who believe in seeking deliverance from disease in prayers, "holy water," and the worshipping of icons. Often this leads them to become victims of brazen deceit. Some of them allow their diseases to run their courses, suffer deformations from sorcerer's "medications," undermine their own health. In Gor'kovskaya Oblast there exists among certain superstitious people a belief that one can bring about the fulfillment of one's wishes (including the restoration of ruined health) by crawling on the knees around lake Svetloyar.

The main support of the faith in "miracle cures" was formed by those lucky instances in which certain symptoms apparently disappeared, or the general condition of certain sick persons was improved. Doctors and scientists have, for a long time now, held that nothing "miraculous" takes place in those cases, and that it is not a matter of "divine intervention," but of the effects of suggestion, autosuggestion and hypnosis. However, the internal physiological mechanism of those phenomena was given a scientific explanation only recently.

How, exactly, does materialistic science explain these phenomena?

Research by the great Russian physiologist I. P. Pavlov and his followers have shown that the cortex plays the leading regulating role in the activities of an organism. It is receptive to the most varied external influences and all changes in it exert an influence on the function of internal organs. And vice versa -- changes in the organism have an effect upon the functions of those sections of the brain, which carry out work of principal importance.

The word represents a mighty physiological stimulant of the human nervous system. I. P. Pavlov calls the word "the signal of signals." It is connected with all of our impressions, with our perception of surrounding reality, and therefore can have an influence on the brain, and -- consequently -- on the work of the internal organs regulated by the latter. An increased secretion of saliva is called forth not only by the taste of cranberries and the sight of them, but by the very word "cranberry" itself.

The activities of the internal organs can change not only under the influence of a word uttered by someone else, but also under the influence of words which take shape in one's own thoughts. We all know how a mere recollection of something pleasant makes the heart beat faster and brings a smile to one's face.

People with a weakened nervous system, especially those suffering from hysteria, are particularly impressionable. They easily give in to suggestion and autosuggestion. The slightest sign of illness suggests to them the thought of serious disease: the person imagines that his legs are being paralyzed, that he is going blind, losing his voice, etc. Under the influence of autosuggestion of such nature, pathological symptoms may actually appear: hysterical paralysis, blindness, deafness and dumbness, and certain afflictions of the heart and of the digestive system.

Similar disorders may occur under the influence of nervous shock: fear in the face of sudden danger, grief, failures in life.

These afflictions are caused by a temporary disruption of nervous processes in the functionally highest sections of the brain, and not by any damage of the wholeness of any organ or a part of the body. Therefore, they are called psychogenetic (from the Greek: psycho -- soul, and genesys -- origin). Psychogenetic deafness is not caused by damage to the ear drum or the hearing nerve, but a negative affectation of the activities of those sections of the brain on which the perception of audio-sensations depends.

Such afflictions often resist the effect of medication. The psychogenic suppression of the functions of certain sectors of the cortex may be eliminated -- according to an accurate definition made by I. P. Pavlov -- by a stronger process of nervous excitement directed in opposition to that which had caused the malfunctions: new happy emotions (and occasionally even unpleasant ones), which force the mental trend of the patient to turn in a different direction.

Verbal stimulants -- suggestion and autosuggestion -- have a similar effect on the psyche. Certain patients can be successfully treated by words alone. Sometimes, doctors immerse the patient into the state of hypnosis in order to enhance the therapeutic power of the word.

According to I. P. Pavlov's theory, hypnosis is partial sleep during which the activities of the cortex are for the most part suppressed and hampered. This is why a person under hypnosis is fully unresponsive to a majority of external stimulants, just as is the case with a sleeping person. However, unlike the case of deep sleep, when all of the cortex is in a state of suppression, in the hypnotized person certain sectors remain awake; they respond only to the voice of the hypnotist. In such manner does the word attain a great power of effect upon the organism of the hypnotized person.

Scientists have conducted the following experiment: The hand of a person was alternately subjected to heat and cold. This led to a contracting of the blood vessels of the hand in the latter instance and to their expansion in the former. These changes were registered by means of a special device -- the pletismograph. Then the subject was hypnotized. A container filled with warm water was placed on his hand, but he was told that ice had been applied. And the measuring device showed a contraction rather than an expansion of the blood vessels.

Man can be hypnotized by several methods: with the aid of monotonous sounds, irritation by a sudden brightly flashing light, etc. A widely accepted method of hypnotizing consists of the verbal suggestion of ideas associated with falling asleep. Soporifics speed up the process of hypnotization.

An attentive second look at "miracle cures" discloses without too much difficulty that many of the methods which produce a state of hypnosis (rhythmic dances, monotonous sounds of the tambourine, smoke from poisonous incense, endless repetition of invocations, and monotonous prayers) have been used by religion for a long time. They can make

certain patients feel better; patients who otherwise have a low receptivity with regard to suggestion. However, when practiced in the setting of religious mysticism, more often than not, those methods, are harmful to health and bring about nervous disorders in the ill person.

Only scientifically sound use of hypnosis and suggestion can have beneficial effects. The treatment of certain diseases through hypnosis and suggestion has been a part of daily medical practice for a long time. Such treatment is used in a strictly individual manner, on the basis of the diagnosis of the disease and the character of its development.

The following case is from the medical practice of one of the authors. The patient, 27 years of age, had lost her voice after a strong emotional experience. A throat specialist found no change in the vocal cords. The woman asked for treatment through hypnosis and suggestion. After several sessions of therapeutic hypnosis, during which it was attempted to persuade her that she was already in good health again, the patient experienced a marked improvement in her condition. Subsequently, her voice became fully restored.

Here we were dealing with an impressionable personality with hysterical tendencies in her make-up. Her affliction was connected with a nervous disorder. A significant note in making the treatment successful was played by the patient's conviction that hypnosis will help her.

It is not hard to see in this case a certain similarity to the so-called miraculous cures achieved with the aid of frenzied prayer, invocations of "holy" pilgrims, etc.

Here is another example: A woman of 37 had stopped walking after a nervous upheaval. She used crutches. A course of therapeutic hypnosis was started. Each session brought improvement. A marked turning point in her condition occurred after the fourth session, which was accompanied by deep hypnotic sleep. It was repeatedly suggested to her: "You are getting better. You can and will walk. You have self-confidence. You are healthy."

On awakening, the patient rose to her feet without help and walked out of the office, forgetting her crutches.

Let us mention another case: A female patient, 23, lost her sight under the following circumstances. From early childhood she had been warned: "Do not touch an electric-light bulb -- it might explode and you will be blinded." And so, while she was screwing in an electric-light bulb, she heard the sound of breaking glass. The young woman suddenly felt a cutting pain in her eyes, as if from a multitude of glass splinters, and then she ceased to see. Actually, the bulb was intact, and it was a carafe that had been broken in the room. An eye specialist recommended recourse to therapeutic suggestion, since the eyes were absolutely undamaged. The loss of sight was fully explainable in terms of a nervous shock. Hearing that suggestion might help her, the patient stated: "I have heard much about hypnosis and suggestion. I do believe that it will help me." Treatment was commenced on the spot, at once. The session was terminated by the words: "Open your eyes. You can see as before. You are well." Hysterical blindness had ended.

Many such cases are already known to medicine. They serve to explain why occasional "miracle" cures have happened; instances about which members of the clergy love to hold elaborate discourses. All that is credited to God is simply and naturally explained by science.